DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 180 FL 026 032

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TITLE	Bilingual Education and the Dropout Argument.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-07-00
NOTE	8p.
CONTRACT	T295005001
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/ncbepubs>.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT	Discover; n4 Jul 1998;
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Bilingual Education; Classroom Environment; Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Rate; Dropouts; Educational Trends; Family Characteristics; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *Hispanic Americans; Language Skills; Poverty; *Public Opinion; *Reading Materials; Trend Analysis; Young Adults

ABSTRACT

Critics of bilingual education have cited the high Hispanic dropout rate as evidence against bilingual education. Since most bilingual education programs are Spanish-English, it is concluded that bilingual education must be responsible. Research shows some factors predicting dropout rates, including low English language ability, poverty, length of residence in the United States, the print environment, and family factors. The important finding from the research is that when these factors are controlled statistically, the dropout rate among Hispanics is similar to that of other groups. There is no evidence that bilingual education results in higher dropout rates. Because bilingual education programs produce better academic English, bilingual education is a positive influence. Good programs have this effect because they supply subject matter knowledge in the students' primary language, which makes the English the students hear and read more comprehensible. They also provide a rapid route to literacy. Another part of the solution is simple and inexpensive: an improved print environment in school, both in the primary language and in English, through better school and classroom libraries and encouragement of free reading through readalouds, sustained silent reading, and quality literature programs. (Contains 22 references.) (MSE)

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July 1998 www.ncbe.gwu.edu No

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Bilingual Education and the Dropout Argument

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Critics of bilingual education have cited the high Hispanic dropout rate as evidence against bilingual education.[1] Since most bilingual programs are Spanish-English, it is concluded that bilingual education must be responsible. In this paper, I review what is known about dropout rates among Hispanic students and refute the notion that bilingual education causes students to drop out. For the sake of this discussion, bilingual education is defined as instruction conducted through both the student's native language and English as a second language, regardless of program model.

Do Hispanic Students Drop Out More?

The latest figures from the U.S. government have been recently released, covering the academic year 1994-1995 (McMillen, Kaufman & Klein, 1997). Defining the dropout rate as the proportion of young adults (ages 16 to 24) who are not enrolled in a high school program and who have not completed high school, there is no question that Hispanic students have higher dropout rates: 30 percent of Hispanic young adults were classified as dropouts, compared to 8.6% for non-Hispanic whites and 12.1% for non-Hispanic blacks.

Among Hispanic young adults, however, dropout figures include many who never enrolled in school and foreign born immigrants who apparently came to the U.S. for work and not education (McMillen et al., 1997, p. 31). The government report calculates that about one-third of the 30% dropout figure for Hispanic young adults is due to non-enrollees. The true Hispanic dropout rate is thus about 20%.

Is Bilingual Education to Blame?

It is true that most students in bilingual education speak Spanish, but not all Spanish-speaking children are in bilingual education — far from it. Fewer than half of the Spanish-speaking children in school in California are limited English proficient (Han, Baker, & Rodriguez, 1997; Snyder & Hoffman, 1996). Of these, not all are in programs that provide instruction in the primary language; according to Macias (1997), about 30% of limited English proficient children were in programs that had academic instruction in the primary language while another 22% had "informal" support in the first language. Thus, most Spanish speaking children are NOT in bilingual education.[2] Since the 20% dropout figure applies to all Spanish speaking children, we can assume that most of those who droppped out were not in bilingual education.

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Some Direct Evidence

There is evidence showing that bilingual education is not only blameless, but actually results in lower dropout rates. Curiel, Rosenthal, & Richek (1986) compared dropout rates for 86 students who had had one or more years of bilingual education with a similar group (n = 90) who had not had bilingual education. Considering all dropouts between grades seven and eleven, Curiel et al. reported that those who had had bilingual education were significantly less likely to dropout (23.5% versus 43%). Most of this difference was due to those who dropped out before high school (8.1% versus 25.8%).

What Accounts for Dropout Rates?

If bilingual education is not the problem, what is? Not surprisingly, English language speaking ability is a factor. Limiting the analysis to those who actually enrolled in school, those who reported speaking English "not well" had a 32.9% dropout rate, while those who spoke English well or very well had a 19.2% dropout rate (McMillan et al., 1997). This is not an argument against bilingual education, because studies have shown that children in well-designed bilingual programs do well in English (Willig, 1985; Krashen, 1996; Greene, 1998).

Several "background factors" have been identified as consistent predictors of dropping out: Socioeconomic class, time spent in the U.S., the presence of print and family factors. Students in wealthier families drop out less, those who have been here longer and who live in a more print-rich environment drop out less, those who live with both parents, and whose parents monitor school work, drop out less, and those who do not become teen parents drop out less.

Hispanic students are well behind majority children in these areas. Approximately 40% of Hispanic children live in poverty, compared to 15% of white non-Hispanic children, and 45% live with parents who have completed high school, compared to 81% of non-Hispanic white children. Only 68% live with both parents, compared to 81% of non-Hispanic white children (Rumberger, 1991).

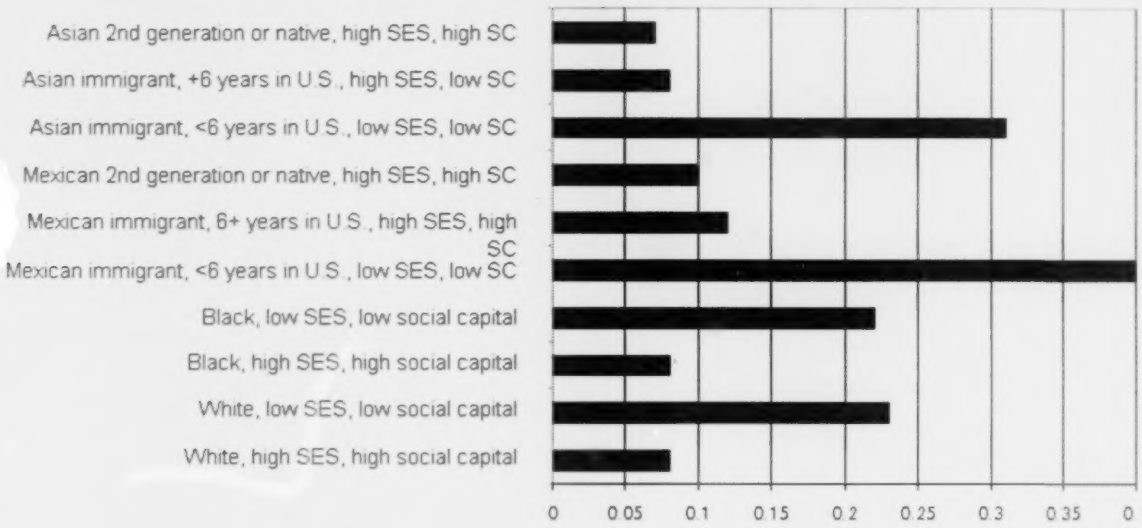
What is of great interest to us is that these background factors appear to be responsible for much if not all of the difference in dropout rates among different ethnic groups. In other words, when researchers control for these factors, there is little or no difference in dropout rates between Hispanics and other groups. This result holds for those who drop out between grades 8 and 10 (Rumberger, 1995) as well as for those who drop out later (Rumberger, 1983; Fernandez, Paulsen, & Hiranko-Nakanishi, 1996; Warren, 1996; White & Kaufman, 1997; Pirog & Magee, 1997).

Rumberger (1995), for example, concluded:

> "...Black, Hispanic, and Native American students have twice the odds of dropping out compared to White students ... however, after controlling for the structural characteristics of family background - particularly, socioeconomic status - the predicted odds of dropping out are no different than those for White students" (p. 605).

White and Kaufman (1997), in their study of high school dropouts between 1980 and 1986, provide a clear example of the impact of these factors (figure 1).

Figure 1
Probabilities of Dropping out of High School:
Impact of Socioeconomic Status (SES), Social Capital (SC)*, and Generations (White & Kaufman, 19


Asian 2nd generation or native, high SES, high SC
Asian immigrant, +6 years in U.S., high SES, low SC
Asian immigrant, <6 years in U.S., low SES, low SC
Mexican 2nd generation or native, high SES, high SC
Mexican immigrant, 6+ years in U.S., high SES, high SC
Mexican immigrant, <6 years in U.S., low SES, low SC
Black, low SES, low social capital
Black, high SES, high social capital
White, low SES, low social capital
White, high SES, high social capital
0
0.05
0.1
0.15
0.2
0.25
0.3
0.35
0

* Social capital is defined as living with both parents, having parents who monitor schoolwork, and ha siblings in college.

Note that new immigrants from Mexico without economic and family factors working in their favor have a higher probability of dropping out than those from other groups. Mexican students with high SES and high social capital, however, show no significant difference in the probability of dropping out, compared to other groups.

Additional evidence that there is strong economic pressure on many Hispanic students comes from Rumberger (1983). When asked to list their reasons for dropping out, only 4% of Hispanic male dropouts said that the reason was "poor performance" in school (compared to 8% of male non-Hispanic white students). 38% of the Hispanic students gave economic reasons (desire to work, financial difficulties, home responsibilities), compared to 22% of the non-Hispanic white students. Similar tendencies were present for female dropouts.

In some studies, the dropout differences between Hispanics and other groups remain after background factors are controlled, but the differences are reduced enormously. Warren (1996) reported that Mexican immigrant students were 24% as likely to make it to grade 12 as non-Hispanic white students, but when factors such as the education and occupation of the head of the household and the size of the family were controlled, this group was 71% as likely to reach grade 12. (See also Fernandez, Paulsen, & Hiranko-Nakanishi, 1989.)

Does Spanish Language Development Increase the Odds of Dropping Out?

The U.S. Government report (McMillan et. al., 1997) found that for those Hispanic young adults who

were enrolled in school in the U.S., there was no difference in dropout rates between those who said they spoke Spanish at home (20.3%) and those who said they spoke English at home (17.5%). White & Kaufman (1997) and Rumberger (1995) report similar results. One study reported that those who rated themselves higher in Spanish dropped out more (Fernandez, Paulsen, & Hiranko-Nakanishi, 1989), but the effect was not large. For each unit change in self-assessed Spanish proficiency, on a scale of 0 (lowest) to 4 (highest), the chances of dropping out increased only 3.4%.

Rumbaut (1995) examined the progress of over 15,000 high school students in San Diego who were children of foreign-born parents. Predictably, those classified as limited English proficient had lower grade point averages and were more likely to drop out. What is very interesting, however, is that those classified as "fluent English proficient" (in other words, former limited English proficient students who were now bilingual), had better grades and slightly lower dropout rates than those rated English-only. This was the case even though parents of "English-only" students were of higher socio-economic status than the parents of the bilingual students.

There is thus no firm evidence that Spanish language development leads to dropping out, and some evidence that suggests that maintenance of the Spanish language and culture may prevent it.

Conclusions

Some factors predicting dropout rates have been identified: low English language ability, poverty, length of residence in the U.S., the print environment, and family factors. The important finding from the research is that when these factors are controlled statistically, the dropout rate among Hispanics is the same or nearly the same as that of other groups. There is no "Hispanic dropout mystery" (Headden, 1997).

There is no evidence that bilingual education results in higher dropout rates. A minority of Hispanic children in California is in bilingual programs, and the reported dropout rates refer to all Hispanic children. In fact, because well-designed bilingual programs produce better academic English (Krashen, 1996), bilingual education is part of the cure, not the disease, as Curiel, Rosenthal, & Richek's (1986) study shows. Good bilingual programs have this effect because they supply subject matter knowledge in the students' primary language, which makes the English the students hear and read much more comprehensible. They also provide a rapid route to literacy: It is much easier to learn to read in a language one already understands, and once literacy is developed, it transfers rapidly to the second language.

Another part of the cure is simple and inexpensive: An improved print environment in school. As noted earlier, the presence of print is a predictor of dropping out, as is low socioeconomic status. It is also well-established that children of poverty typically live in environments with few books (e.g. Smith, Constantino, & Krashen, 1997; McQuillan, 1998). In addition, we know that the amount of free voluntary reading done is an excellent predictor of literacy development and that children read more when they have more access to books and are read to more (Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998). Improving the print environment in both the primary language and in English, through better school libraries and classroom libraries, and encouraging free reading in both languages through readalouds (Trelease, 1996), sustained silent reading (Krashen, 1993), and quality literature programs promise to increase literacy development in both languages, which will make a powerful contribution to school success.

Endnotes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was published in the CABE Newsletter 21(4): 11,25,27, 1998.

[2] California data only tells us how many LEP children are in bilingual programs but does not break this down by native language. Jim Crawford has pointed out to me, however, that 96.3% of bilingual teachers provide instruction in Spanish. We can thus assume that about 96% of the children are in Spanish language programs. If so, 36% of Spanish language LEP children were in full bilingual programs in California in 1997 (total Spanish-speaking LEP = 1,107,186, total in bilingual education = 410,127, estimate of Spanish-speaking LEP in bilingual education = 394,952).

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The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) and is operated under Contract No. T295005001 by The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Center for the Study of Language and Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. This document is not copyrighted. Readers are free to reproduce the material contained in this publication with proper credit given to NCBE and the author(s).

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